

San Jose and the Mexican-American
War:
The Santa Clara Campaign

An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

by
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Introduction

The Santa Clara Campaign was part of the Mexican-American War. The chief result of the war, was the confiscation of Rancheros livestock by a few individuals whose leader was a Mexican citizen, but was neither Mexican nor American by birth.

Spanish authorities had established a community called El Pueblo de San Jose de Guadalupe. It was built on the south end of the San Francisco Bay, on the east bank of the Guadalupe River. This settlement had been intended to house pobladores (settlers) and invalidos (retired soldiers). Most of the inhabitants, at the time of American conquest, were Californios, with the exception of Carlos Maria Weber. Weber was a thirty-two year old Prussian who was well educated. Weber was a Mexican leader and admitted to being the chief instigator of the Santa Clara Campaign, which lasted for a little over a year.

Carlos Maria Weber

Carlos Maris Weber was a well-educated Prussian who at the age of thrity-two led the Santa Clara Campaign. He was not an American citizen nor was he enlisted to serve under the American flag.

Revolutions were something that Weber had gotten used to. His part in the Homberg Revolution led him to leave Europe in 1836. Weber joined the Texas struggle within a year of his arrival in the United States. He traveled overland with the Bartleson party, and became one of the most active foreigners who attempted to wrest California from Mexico.

Although Weber helped to free California from Mexico, he didn't plan on the United States taking over the land. His consideration of California's independence was for he himself to have control over the land. He was planning on being one of a few leaders of a small nation that was completely independant. He definately didn't want California to be just another state.

Weber settled in Sam Jose where hr opened a general store, a blacksmith shop, and a flour mill. He established a bakery

that sold Sea-bread. Sea-bread was very important to sailors. It could be kept for long periods of time and was very valuable to them, especially when they had long voyages. Along with these he opened many other enterprises. Soon, though, he was emerged in debt. He began to exploit every opportunity during the American Mexican War. By doing this he accumulated a fortune and soon purchased a Rancho near San Jose.

Ignoring the requirement that a applicant for Mexican citizenship had to be a Roman Catholic, the governor of Alta California, Manuel Micheltorena, granted Weber citizenship and signed his papers. On February 20, 1844, Carlos Maria Weber was a citizen of Mexico. Now that he had his Mexican citizenship he could better establish his empire.

When Alta California Commandante, Jose Castro appealed to Weber to rally foreigners to help get rid of Governor Micheltorena, Weber readily agreed to organize a militia for demonstration near San Jose in November 1844.

Castro failed to recognize Weber's ambitions. On April 12, 1845, Castro wrote a letter of commendation for Webers efforts in the revolution and promised him a military designation. The comission, declaring Weber a Capítan in the Mexican Auxiliary Infantry, was signed three days later. Even though Weber didn't respect Mexico or the Californios he never relinquished his title.

Fremont, Captain John Charles Fremont

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The Bear Flaggers

During the late winter of 1845-1846, Captain John Charles Fremont, in command of an armed United States scientific expedition, roamed unrestrained throughout the most populated midcoast section of California. In March of 1846, news of Fremont's defiance ~~at~~ Pico del Gavilan reached San Jose, but overnight he withdrew from Gavilan Peak and started to move slowly towards Oregon. The Gavilan Peak episode caused the United States Consul Thomas O. Larkin to appeal for protection from the Pacific Squadron of the United States Navy. In response the sloop U.S.S. Portsmouth reached Monterey on April 22, 1846.

For unknown reasons, Carlos Weber and James Stokes, an Englishman, plotted during May of 1846 to thwart Comandante Castro's proposed strategy to unseat Governor Pio Pico. Weber was completely in the dark. ~~He~~ ^{He} had no idea of the origin of the Bear Flag Revolution initiated by Fremont in Northern California. In June he learned of it through the confidences of a United States Navy Lieutenant. The Bear Flaggers wanted to set up an independant state.

Weber was in a unique position. He was ready and waiting for a revolution, he maintained good relations with both the Californos and the United States officials in San Francisco and in Monterey. He learned of the progress of the Bear Flag Revolution, and he continued to communicate with both sides.

Few Californios were alarmed by the Bear Flaggers. Castro was slow with retaliatory measures and issued rhetorical proclamations as the Bear Flaggers' pattern of larceny quickly developed. Castro believed that Weber was an ally so he confirmed his appointment with the Mexican Infantry and asked Weber to help put down the Bear Flaggers. Weber neither agreed or refused, he replied with double talk.

On the pretense of business Weber traveled to Yerba Buena(San Francisco) "to more fully satisfy himself regarding the coming events." By then the revolutionists were moving closer to San Francisco, but no one in Yerba Buena knew that Fremont was openly riding with the Bear Flaggers and was with a party at Sausalito until the morning of July 1.

When returning to San Jose from Yerba Buena, Weber detoured from the direct route riding to the Red Woods(now Woodside), a refuge for English-speaking foreigners. San Francisco Sub-Prefect Juan Copinger's sympathies must have been apparent, but Weber pleaded ~~unable~~ to join the revolutionary movement. Weber also sent word to Santa Cruz to arouse foreigners living there.

A local San Jose resident, Ascension Bernal, the wife of Juan Buelna, informed officers in the Mexican-California army that Weber was concealing weapons under his living quarters. Weber always believed that Copinger exposed him; he would never accept the fact that a woman had been responsible for it all. Knowledge of the arsenal and Weber's recent actions aroused a violent mood among the Californios in San Jose. Upon learning the United States Navy had occupied Monterey, Castro offered his soldiers and Militiamen the choice of fleeing with him to southern California or returning to their families. Weber, Bird and Washburn asked to accompany Castro. The three foreigners, Castro and a few Californios left San Jose on the evening of July 7, 1846. Fremont and the Bearflaggers were not ready to embrace Weber and his associates, who were far more safer with Castro than being left with the angry San Jose populace.

Concluding that the United States must have declared war on Mexico, and assuming that Fremont had more recent orders from Washington, D.C., Commander J.D. Sloat, in command of the United States Navy Pacific Squadron, raised the American flag in Monterey, California, on July 7, 1846. He proclaimed that all Californios had the same privileges as United States citizens, and any provisions purchased by the United States Navy would be promptly paid for at fair rates. Such promises probably greatly lessened any desire by Californios to resist a change in government. They were thankful to escape any further violence from the Bear Flaggers.

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After the capture of Weber, Castro and the others, James Stokes, an Englishman, ran up the American Flag in the plaza at the pueblo of San Jose but was immediately cut down. After Weber's abrupt departure from San Jose any other would-be revolutionists hesitated at their rendezvous place, Cook's racho, until the unexpected arrival of lieutenant Archibald Gillespie, U.S.M.C., the man who had carried messages for Fremont and ~~who was~~ in charge of the Bear Flaggers, a small band of Bear Flaggers. With his encouragement the local group under the command of Thomas Fallon, an Irishman, rode into the now vacated pueblo on July 11 and seized the San Jose juzgado (courthouse).

Commodore Robert F. Stockton, U.S.N., who arrived in Monterey aboard the frigate U.S.S. Congress after the American flag had been raised, assumed Slaoat's command of the Pacific Squadron on July 29, 1846. Conspiring with Fremont and Gillespie, Stockton chose as his first priority the capture of ~~coman~~ comandante Castro, considered by them to be the most probable leader of any armed resistance. The Bear Flaggers were reorganized as the California Battalion.

Since they had a common enemy, Castro joined forces in Los Angeles with his former enemy, Governor Pio Pico. Having no notification of a Declaration of War, they sent emissaries to Stockton when he arrived in San Pedro and asked for an explanation of his actions. Stockton smugly reported to the U.S. Secretary of the Navy, "I did not answer his (Castro's) last letter, but by a verbal message, which does not properly belong in history." 

The Californios disbanded in Los Angeles on August 10, and Castro fled to Mexico. On the following day American Consul Larkin entered Los Angeles, which no longer contained defenders. Not until three days later did Stockton arrive with a band to parade unopposed through a street lined with curious people.

U.S. President James K. Polk had signed the Declaration of War against Mexico on May 13, 1846, but the Pacific Squadron of the U.S. Navy in the California Theater had no direct knowledge that war existed until the sloop U.S.S. Warren sailed into Monterey on August 12.

Widely separated Battalion companies were considered sufficient to control the whole area of California. Fremont would assume jurisdictional responsibility for the Northern Department of the state whenever the Navy withdrew.

To command the Southern Department, Stockton appointed Gillespie who was now a Captain in the California Battalion. Gillespie described his unit of fifty Bear Flaggers as "Perfect drunkards whilst in this Ciudad of wine and Aguardiente (brandy) They were men for whom the Californians could have no respect." 

Weber's Rangers,
El Pueblo De San Jose

Maintaining that he had been held hostage by Comandante Castro, Weber had returned overland with Maddox's Battalion party pursuing Californios Northward. The journey held an excellent opportunity for Weber to meet an eager Marine Lieutenant. The party reached Monterey on the evening of September 2, 1846. Weber was re-established in San Jose before the end of the month.

Although Maddox expressed confidence that Weber would be in San Jose, he was in Yerba Buena, where he remained until the second week in October. He must have reveled in the excitement of the insurrection news, of the celebration for Stockton, and of the military campaign organization.

On October 8, 1846, Stockton ordered the officers and sailors assigned to the San Jose and Sonoma garrisons to return to the Portsmouth, and authorized militias to be established in each of the settlements. Stockton personally appointed Weber to be a sergeant in command of the San Jose ⁵⁰ militia. Until mid-November the pueblo was without a Navy garrison, and during half of the interval Weber was absent from the settlement.

The San Jose militia was not expected to carry on military operations. It was to maintain "Strict surveillance" over the "Conduct & spirit manifested by the Californias and others." As commander of the Northern department, Montgomery suggested to Weber, "Endeavor to the extent of your means, to secure all in the enjoyment of their rights and properties and to maintain good order within the bounds of your command." Ignoring this Weber's subsequent actions in San Jose and the vicinity created a situation comparable to that which Gillespie produced in the Southern Department. With little official status Weber assumed authority. Disregarding the modest order for ten militiamen, he raised a company of sixty-five. He referred to them as Rangers, hoping to emulate the famous Texas organization. Weber considered the company to be a group of scouts who, "scoured the country in every direction in pursuit of the enemy."

Weber never enlisted in the California Battalion. Whenever he persuaded a man to enlist, Weber considered the man to be a member of his Rangers. This led to misunderstandings. Men serving in the California Battalion as enlistees differed greatly from the men serving in the militia as volunteers.

Montgomery urged for the militia's headquarters to be relocated to a relatively secure place where they would be safer in case of attack and proposed the "hoosegow" (juzgado). Instead Weber used his general store, which had his residence in the rear.

Montgomery was disturbed that the American flag in San Jose was repeatedly cut down. As sergeant of the militia, Weber

was charged to the flag flying.

With no legal authority Weber began immediately to confiscate livestock. Weber's horse rustling did not go unchallenged. The rancheros believed that he was violating the American's proclamations; they petitioned for Weber's removal from his official position.

"Changes"

To free the Portsmouth for action in Mexican waters, Stockton ordered the command of the Northern Department transferred from Montgomery to Captain Joseph Bartine Hull, U.S.N. The Warren, commanded by Hull, dropped anchor near Sausalito the first week in November, and on November 10, 1846 she anchored in Yerba Buena Cove.

Before departing the Portsmouth had financial commitments to honor. A launch carried gold to pay for her accounts at Sutter's Fort. When the boat failed to return, searches were initiated, but no clue to its fate ~~was~~ found. It was later confirmed that the cause was; mutiny, murder, and robbery by her crew.

The loss of the launch and the lack of bread delayed the Portsmouth's sailing. Weber held the Navy contract for production of sea-biscuit, but instead of delivering the 26,000 pounds of it in large quantities he delivered it in small quantities.

Weber and his followers never ceased to be suspicious of John Copinger because of his British origin and his Mexican allegiance. Copinger, who had refused to join Weber in assisting the Bear Flaggers, and a Californio companion, were arrested in early November after a conversation between the two was

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overheard. They were held in jail until Montgomery ordered their release.

In mid-November American Consul Larkin was kidnapped while en route to Yerba Buena. The following day, the battle of Navidad in the Salinas Valley, Californios intercept a herd of horses that were meant for Fremont's Battalion. They made no attempt to follow up on these actions. Fremont made no effort to pursue them, but he was stimulated to move from Monterey to San Juan Bautista on November 17.

Montgomery was warned that a possible dangerous series of actions may take place. As soon as he was notified a cutter was sent to the Embarcadero de Santa Clara on November 18 to obtain bread, supposedly, but instead it carried Lt. John Rutledge, U.S.N., and twenty armed Navy men on a secret mission. Monterey declared that Salomon Pico, concealed at mission Santa Clara, was inciting a revolt in the Northern Department. and that all Americans were being threatened by Californios who wished them all to be dead. The people were all warned at Mission San Jose, Mission Santa Clara, and the Pueblo de San Jose.

Weber was ordered to notify all residents of Monterey request for security. The residents of Mission San Jose were requested to move to the pueblo or Mission Santa Clara. This caused the Americans to move closer together.

Rutledge searched Mission Santa Clara, but Salomon Pico was not found because he had accompanied Castro to Mexico. What was discovered there was twenty guns and gun powder.

Official notification of change of command in the Northern Department was not forwarded to Weber until November 26, a week after it had transpired. For the fourth time Montgomery had requested a militia muster. Weber repeatedly failed to comply because he had exceeded his quota-orders.

Montgomery never displayed confidence in Weber. He was aware that Weber did whatever he pleased with no regard to the American cause and without orders. Montgomery repeatedly emphasized that Weber's orders were coming from Stockton.

Montgomery relinquished command of the Northern Department on November 19, the day the Savannah returned to the San Francisco Bay. The re-establishment of a garrison at San Jose, as planned by Captains; Montgomery and Hull, awaited only the man-power arriving aboard the Savannah. She was not a happy ship. After a long tour as a flag ship of the squadron under Sloat's command, she assumed a lesser role under Captain Mervine. The crew were embarrassed by the Battle on Dominguez. The enlistment time of most of the crew had expired. Even when the men were offered a twenty-five percent increase in their pay if they re-enlisted, they remained disenchanted. Attempts to appeal to the men's patriotism had little meaning because most of them were foreigners. Stockton blamed the officers in charge for the crew's dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

On January 5, 1847 the fighting stopped, and two days later a treaty was signed. A formal ceremony was held on January 7, 1847, there were over 100 spectators. This may not have been the treaty that gave California it's independace but what it did do was aide the whole cause and give hope to those still battling with the Mexicans.

Footnotes

- 1) Dorothy Regnery, The Battle of Santa Clara (Smith & McKay 1978) p.4

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